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Good Times on the Diamond Jo

Steamboat excursions on the upper Mississippi were among the most popular of Iowa pastimes. Scores of handsome packets were pressed into service to meet the demands of all kinds of organizations for all-day outings on the Father of Waters. Although a hundred different steamboats plied the eastern border of Iowa during the 1850's, they were unable to satisfy the passenger demand. After the Civil War, raftboats, towboats, and even ferryboats were called upon to transport excursion parties. These trips were enjoyed by excursionists from inland communities as well as river towns. So great was the demand and so large the crowds that special excursion barges were constructed for the smaller craft to insure a place for all.

Newspaper editors were frequently instigators as well as recorders of river excursions. "This warm weather will remind people", the *Clinton Iowa Age* declared on June 4, 1869, "that about these days pic-nics in the groves and excursions on the river are exactly in order." Within the month fully a dozen excursions were run out of Clinton. The "teachers and scholars" of the Con-

gregational Sabbath School steamed to Sabula, Bellevue, and Savanna on June 19th. Eleven days later the Presbyterians chartered the steamboat *Diamond Jo* with her fine band for an excursion to Rock Island. Four hundred Clintonians made the trip. This same craft, under the command of "Diamond Jo" Reynolds himself, took over four hundred Baptists and their friends from Clinton to Rock Island on July 3rd, where they mingled with a happy group of Methodists who had arrived from Muscatine aboard the *City of Keithsburg*. The total receipts for this trip were \$976.37 and the Baptists made a net profit of \$600.94.

Such excursions were popular because they were inexpensive, could be run on week-ends and holidays, and were usually for some worthy cause. Equally popular although far more expensive was an excursion to St. Paul and the Falls of St. Anthony which George Catlin had denominated the "Fashionable Tour" as early as 1837. To this Mecca for honeymooner and vacationist the Rock Island Railroad had run its "Grand Excursion" of 1854 to celebrate the arrival of the first iron-horse on the banks of the Mississippi. Thousands of Iowans can still recall the pleasures of such a trip aboard one of the packets of the Diamond Jo Line in the first decade of the twentieth

eth century. A smaller number can recall earlier trips aboard the Diamond Jo boats. It is doubtful if many can remember the excursion which Clinton citizens made in 1869 aboard the steamboat *Diamond Jo*. This was probably the first such excursion made by a Diamond Jo boat. Since Joseph Reynolds himself commanded his namesake on this trip, and since he served a relatively short time as steamboat captain, the story of this voyage is well worth recording.

Few excursions to the Falls of St. Anthony have received more publicity than that of the *Diamond Jo* in 1869. Perhaps this was due to the fact that E. H. Thayer, editor of the *Clinton Iowa Age* was one of the prime instigators of the trip. At the time of the excursion a fellow editor, M. A. Fuller, of the *Chicago Republican* was visiting Thayer, and it is possible that he expressed a desire to make such a trip. At any rate on July 2nd it was announced that Captain Joseph Reynolds would charter the *Diamond Jo* for such an excursion at \$25 per couple if fifty couples would participate. Since room, meals, and transportation were included in this seven-day voyage it is difficult to see how "Diamond Jo" expected to make any money on it.

The *Diamond Jo* was scarcely the boat to charter for so large a crowd. Built at Prairie du

Chien in 1864 for grain transport, she was 165 feet long, thirty-two feet of beam, had a depth of four feet three inches, and measured 242 tons. Designed as a towboat, the *Diamond Jo* usually pushed several grain barges, and was notoriously slow and hard to handle. Moreover, she possessed only nineteen state rooms with two berths each and was therefore capable of providing suitable accommodations for only thirty-eight passengers. Her United States Steamboat Inspectors Certificate, dated July 10, 1865, shows she had additional berths for fifty deck or other passengers. Hence, the *Diamond Jo* was not equipped to carry fifty couples. But the lack of comfortable accommodations along with other drawbacks did not deter the legal limit of eighty-eight Clintonites such as the Lambs, the Youngs, and the Seamans, from making the trip, largely through the efforts of Horace Baker and H. B. Sutherland.

The party began boarding the *Diamond Jo* on the evening of July 5th. At nine o'clock "amid the cheers of the crowd on shore, properly responded to by the excursionists on board" the *Diamond Jo* "cut her cable" and turned her bow upstream, making fair time to Fulton. Here the excursionists noted with apprehension that the *Diamond Jo* picked up two grain barges.

Most of the party paid little attention to the

progress of the *Diamond Jo* that first evening. "The boat fairly off," E. H. Thayer wrote to his paper from Dubuque, "the tables in the cabin were piled up, the music summoned, and the dance commenced. But not to continue long. The ladies could hardly bear the idea of allowing such hours and such opportunities for dancing to pass without being improved — but the fact is, they were too wearied with the day's toil in preparing for the trip, to enter into the dance with spirit — and consequently we must chronicle the statement that the first attempt of this excursion party to dance on the *Diamond Jo* was a failure." Nobody felt like retiring at midnight, however, and the party accordingly gathered in small groups, making new acquaintances, and planning for the morrow's fun.

It was not until two o'clock that the excursionists repaired to their staterooms. It was then that they received their first blow. According to Thayer there were "either too many people on board or too few state-rooms and berths." Of course the ladies had to be provided for, and so several gentlemen gave up their berths and slept on thin mattresses on the cabin floor. "O, how my bones ache", wailed the promoter of the trip, who reclined on the same mattress with B. S. De Forrest and L. W. Buck. The latter tried to sleep and dream of St. Paul and the nice time in store

for the "happy" excursionists, an effort that met with indifferent success.

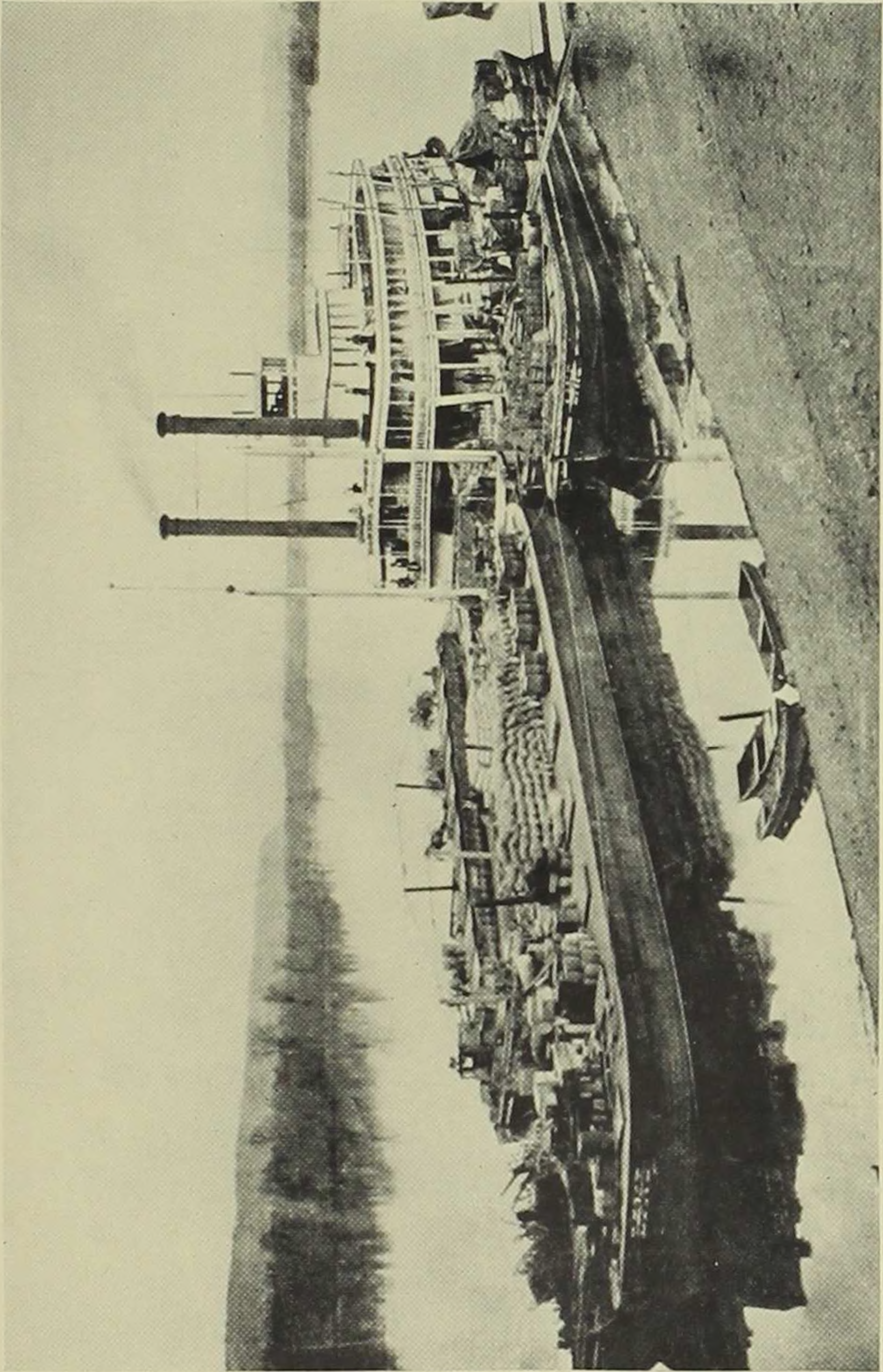
After a couple hours of tortured sleep the "floor lodgers" were routed out by a "cross-grained" and "crabbed" steward at 4:30 A. M. in order to prepare the cabin for breakfast. When the sleepy men learned that the *Diamond Jo* was still eight miles below Bellevue there were "mutterings" and sounds of "mutiny", with threats to return to Clinton on the first boat. Ever "polite and gentlemanly" Captain Reynolds assuaged the excursionists. "When we get to Dubuque", he declared, "we will lay in the articles we need — we will have some cots, quilts, pillows, two or three more cooks, ice, and a few drinkables, &c., and we will yet make the trip pleasant and agreeable." All breathed easier at this promise for everyone knew that "Diamond Jo" was as good as his word. A tasty breakfast improved the general tone of the Clintonians and it was generally felt that the captain, clerk, and other officers would soon whip the *Diamond Jo* into shape and take care of the overflow crowd.

The excursionists disembarked at Dubuque shortly after dinner. Some rode in the street cars, many crowded the walks, all expressed themselves well-pleased with Dubuque, especially the bakeries and confectionaries. "From Dubuque the

improvements promised by the Captain were carried out to the letter", E. H. Thayer recorded. "The first supper on board was excellent in every respect, and general good nature brightened up all countenances."

A pleasant feature of any river trip is the constantly changing panorama. After tea the excursionists assembled outside the cabin to admire the beautiful and majestic scenery along the Iowa shore. Who would not agree with the following! "There is a good deal of sameness about the Mississippi river scenery, but it is a sameness of which the eye never tires, because the scenery is gotten up on such a gorgeous and extensive plan, that the more a person looks the more he becomes infatuated and the more anxious he is to see all and miss nothing. . . . From the second evening of our trip to the Sabbath following, we saw rock-ribbed hills and mountains, beautiful vales, and such other gorgeous river scenery as no other stream on the face of the earth can boast."

Another feature of any Mississippi voyage is the relative slowness with which many craft churn upstream. Even in 1869 the excursionists were appalled at the snail-like movement of the *Diamond Jo*, for many doubtless had traveled aboard such sleek racehorses as the *Phil Sheridan*, the *Sucker State*, and the *Hawkeye State*, steamboats



FROM THE COLLECTION OF WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

THE *DIAMOND JO* WITH A FOUR-BARGE TOW IN 1875

whose speed was proverbial. "Wednesday morning found us plodding along, as only a stern wheel boat with two loaded barges, can plod. It was like going to a funeral by steam. True there was hilarity and fun on board. Dancing occasionally — music on the piano, singing of popular songs with chorus by the company, a little euchre, more whist and a good deal of 'seven up' — but the confounded boat moved so slow that we all thought it was more becoming on such an occasion to be demure and solemn, so that it looked as though the fun part was made simply from custom. At wood landings the company would go ashore and hunt up little amusements such as climbing the bluffs, milking the cows, (of course paying for the milk), buying nic-nacs at the solitary store, filling pitchers with nice spring water, gathering specimens from the rocky beach, promenading up and down the shore, skipping smooth rocks upon the river, &c."

At two o'clock on Wednesday afternoon the *Diamond Jo* finally crawled up to the Lansing levee, having made 164 miles in forty-one hours, or approximately four miles an hour. This was about the same time the *Phil Sheridan* required to run from St. Louis to Dubuque, a distance of 425 miles. Mournfully Editor Thayer recorded: "No wonder Frank Woodworth expresses the hope

that we will reach St. Paul before the river freezes over, especially if he is as poor a skater as he says he is; though he must be terribly slow on the skate if he couldn't beat the *Diamond Jo's* time thus far."

Leaving Lansing behind, the excursionists were soon passing along the southeastern border of Minnesota. Here the redman could still be seen, although the ladies of the party apparently did not admire these "sons of the forests" because they were not "clad with that extravagance which civilization might require." The stronger sex was not averse to such apparel, however, and H. B. Sutherland even relieved himself of a "splendid dissertation" on the subject of "legs" suggested by the "well formed proportions of a red daughter of the forest."

Steamboat excursionists are likely to cut grotesque capers when away from home. The Clintonites reserved their most ludicrous performance for Brownsville, the first Minnesota town above the northern boundary of Iowa. After visiting a celebrated cave a few voyageurs returned to the *Diamond Jo* with a suspicious looking keg. Others bought out a music store and formed a "Gideons Band" with which to entertain the citizens of Brownsville. H. B. Sutherland served as grand trumpeter, J. E. Voneiff as jewsharper, William

Young as drummer, Frank Woodworth as blower general, Lafayette Lamb as second trumpeter, C. H. Leadbetter as third trumpeter, S. Thomas as fifer, and a regiment of supernumeraries with tin horns, tin trumpets, tin pans, and similar instruments. "The concert which followed eclipsed all like entertainments ever heard or conceived of", according to the *Iowa Age*. "It was unanimously voted that *one* such exhibition was as much as the excursionists were entitled to, and the thing was not repeated."

The Clintonians tarried but a moment at La-Crosse and Winona. As they approached Lake Pepin the gigantic bluffs called forth the "loudest exclamations of wonder" from the entire company. Lake City was described as a "perfect beauty" of a town. After hearing the romantic tale of Maiden Rock the excursionists concluded that parents should not interfere with their daughters' choice of lovers. While the *Diamond Jo* was leaving its second barge at Red Wing to be loaded with grain, the passengers searched for "cornelians, agates, and precious stones". The remainder of the trip was made with dispatch, the *Diamond Jo* nosing into the St. Paul wharf on Friday, June 9th, at 6 A. M.

The excursionists were not slow to plan their tour of the twin cities. In "elegant rigs" they

drove to St. Anthony and "took a peep at the saw mills, flour mills, woolen mills and machine shops, took a hurried look at the dams, canals, aprons, sluices, tunnels, and shafts of the water power, imbibed a few glasses of mineral water, went down some rickety stairs into a cave . . . admired the beautiful Falls of St. Anthony . . . then crossed the river on the suspension bridge into Minneapolis". After driving through the Minneapolis residential district — "the most attractive city we have seen in the west — if we except Clinton", the party visited the "stupendous" lumber mills, wheat elevators, public buildings, and water works. They reached the Nicollet Hotel in time for a "square meal" and a noon rest.

After dinner the party started for Minnehaha Falls and old Fort Snelling. According to Thayer, the "world-renowned Minnehaha" was a "nice, modest, pretty, beautiful, magnificent cascade. The more you look, the more you admire it. It is like gazing upon a beautiful woman — you look and admire, and admire and look. . . . Laughing, sparkling, bright and shining — Minnehaha is the grand and gay princess of all waterfalls. You love her at first sight!"

After buying postcards of Minnehaha and indulging in ice cream the party whirled away to Fort Snelling, which overlooked the Mississippi

at the junction of that stream with the Minnesota River. Gathering storm clouds cut short their visit to a great cave nearby and the excursionists hurried back to St. Paul which they reached at six o'clock. Although fatigued from their sightseeing, all were "wonderfully well pleased" with their tour. Many prophesied a great future for St. Paul; some were even heard to exclaim, "were we not a Clintonian we would be a St. Paulian."

That night a tired but happy group of excursionists returned to the *Diamond Jo*. Forgotten was the dance which some had proposed that morning. All on board quickly "piled" themselves away for sleep at an early hour and at two o'clock on Saturday morning the *Diamond Jo* was bound downstream for Clinton.

The return trip was made in record time for the *Diamond Jo*, unhampered as she was by barges and with little freight aboard. The boat went booming through Lake Pepin while a gale whipped up white caps. She paused a moment at Lake City, danced gaily past Reads Landing, and put in at Winona for a couple of hours. The only accident occurred when she unslipped a rudder while approaching LaCrosse but this was quickly repaired. The best dance of the trip was held on Saturday night. A solemn religious service was conducted in the cabin on Sunday morning with

A. P. Hosford reading one of Dr. Alexander's excellent sermons and E. W. Goodale concluding with prayer. The *Diamond Jo* stopped at McGregor twenty minutes for noon refreshments. On Sunday evening the lights of Dubuque blinked their welcome and once more a short stop was made. Then off they sped on the final leg of the journey, with all retiring at an early hour. At four o'clock on Monday morning the *Diamond Jo* glided up to Butcher's landing at Clinton, having made the round-trip in exactly six days and seven hours, including the numerous stops.

The voyage of the *Diamond Jo* was typical of hundreds along the eastern border of Iowa. The Clinton excursionists were not inclined to praise the *Diamond Jo* as the best craft for such a trip because they felt Captain Reynolds had crowded on too many passengers for the comfort of all aboard. The boat was unable to feed so large a number satisfactorily, a first and second table being needed and this produced considerable complaint among those who partook of the remains at the second table. The passengers had nothing but venom for the "cross-grained, snappish, snarling old colored curmudgeon" who served as steward, but praised the efforts of "Diamond Jo" and the other officers who tried to make them comfortable in their cramped quarters.

It was customary for excursionists to adopt resolutions thanking the captain and his officers for their many kindnesses. A meeting was called in the cabin of the *Diamond Jo* on July 10th with J. Scofield presiding and J. F. McGuire as secretary. Judge E. H. Thayer, editor of the *Iowa Age*, served as chairman of the resolutions committee with A. P. Hosford and C. H. Leadbetter. Copies of the resolutions were presented to Captain Joseph Reynolds, to the committee which had labored industriously to arrange the excursion, and to the Clinton newspapers. "Resolved, That we unanimously tender to Captain Reynolds and the other officers of said steamboat *Diamond Jo*, our hearty and cordial thanks for the kind, gentlemanly and courteous treatment extended to us on the trip from Clinton, Iowa, to St. Paul, Minnesota, and return; that we shall always refer with pleasant recollections to the uniform kindness we have received from said captain and officers, and that we take pleasure in recommending to the traveling public who patronize steamboats on the Mississippi, either for business or pleasure, the staunch and commodious steamer *Diamond Jo*." The able skipper of the *Diamond Jo* responded to these sentiments in a "brief, neat and pointed speech."

M. A. Fuller of the *Chicago Republican* was

then called upon for a few remarks, after which, at the request of the party, he read an original poem written during the voyage. Despite his kindly sentiments, Editor Thayer felt constrained to write: "Our advice to excursion parties to St. Paul, is, to have the company fall below the number the boat can accommodate. Avoid the necessity of a second table, as you would avoid the plague. Be sure and take two days at St. Paul. Don't go on a boat that takes along two loaded barges. If you have a saucy, ugly steward, kick him overboard the first day. And then if you expect to have everything just as you want it, our advice is — don't go." He might have added, don't expect to take a week's all-expense cruise for the price of twenty-five dollars per couple. Apparently "Diamond Jo" Reynolds himself learned a lesson, for it was years before his boats attempted a similar excursion, and then they were larger and properly equipped.

WILLIAM J. PETERSEN